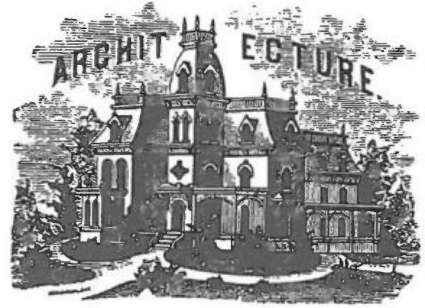


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Wallace K. Harrison
1895-1981

From his design of the Trylon and Perisphere for the 1939 World's Fair until completion of the Metropolitan Opera House in 1966, Wallace Kirkman Harrison played a dominant role in New York City's architecture. Among the few buildings Harrison built outside New York state are two houses on Mount

Desert Island, where the architect also transformed a barn into a summer house for his wife and himself.

Many of Harrison's monumental commissions came to him through Nelson A. Rockefeller, whose lifelong friendship with Harrison dated from 1931 when the two men met during their respective work at Rockefeller Center. Since early childhood Rockefeller had spent summers at his family's estate in Seal Harbor, Maine, which he grew to love. In 1916 Nelson's father, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., donated 5,000 acres on Mount Desert Island toward the formation of what would become Acadia National Park. Part of the island's craggy, pine-covered shore was given to Nelson who, in 1940, asked Harrison to design a house there (Figure 1).

Nelson Rockefeller loved to sail, and Harrison's scheme included a conical stairwell in which sails could hang to dry. Rising above the roofline, this structure dominates the house's ocean side like a ship's mast. But the spiral stairway that encircles the mast's exterior and the windows piercing it transform the tower into a lighthouse as well (Figure 2).

"The Anchorage," as the Rockefeller House is called, is one of Harrison's most striking designs. The house is built on a plan of intersecting curves.



Figure 1. The Anchorage, Nelson A. Rockefeller House, Seal Harbor, 1978 view (Courtesy of Robert Hylander).



Figure 2. The Anchorage, Detail of ocean side, 1987 view (Courtesy of the Author).

The master bedroom occupies the second story of the outward-facing curve. On this ocean side a cantilevered porch and steel supporting column give the house a soaring feeling, as if it were a great boat braving the billows (Figure 3). The more conventional entrance side, with doorway standing within the protective inner curve, is made of white pine slabs which meet the ground solidly. Interiors are bathed in natural light; and while sturdy walls protect the house's western, inland side, its eastern elevation opens to magnificent views of the coast.

Two years prior to construction of the Anchorage, the evocative Maine coast had inspired another modern architect. The Anchorage shares with George Howe's 1939 Mount Desert Island house for Clara Fargo Thomas a cantilevered deck and use of local materials. Although similar in many respects, Howe's rectilinear plan and horizontal emphasis on window panels and balcony railings convey a different feeling from that of Harrison's curved plan and various readings of the stairwell.

The Anchorage was much admired, and in 1946 William A. M. Burden asked Harrison to design a house in nearby Northeast Harbor for his wife and himself (Figure 4). Like Rockefeller, Burden and his wife had summered in this part of Maine since early childhood.

The Burdens wanted a small, inconspicuous summer house with a large bedroom, two dressing areas, and a large living-dining room. Mrs. Burden preferred a curved shape to a straight-sided-box form. Harrison responded with a one story gently undulating wall, which delineates living and dining

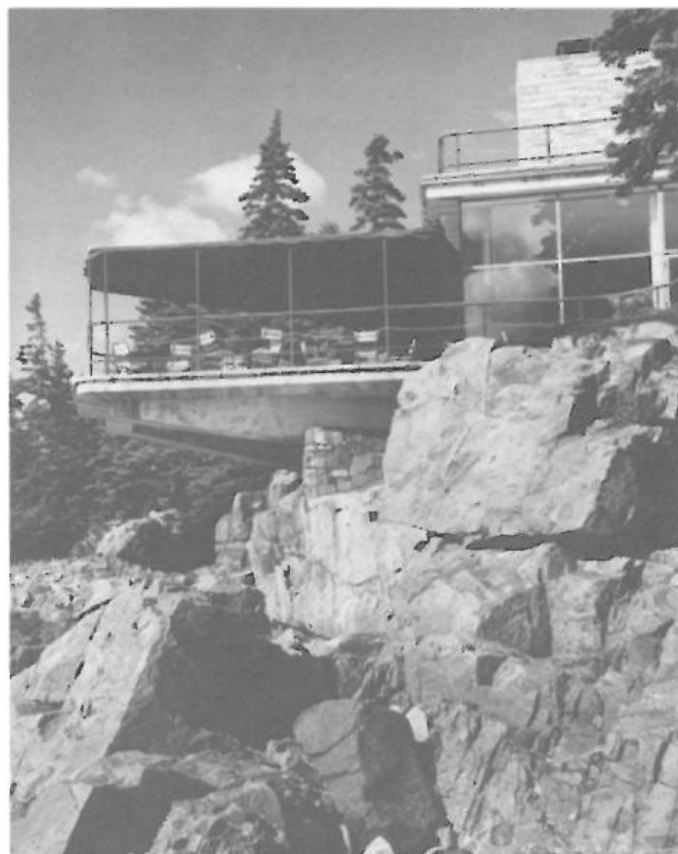


Figure 3. The Anchorage, Detail of cantilevered porch, 1987 view (Courtesy of the Author).



Figure 4. William A. M. Burden House, Northeast Harbor, 1987 view (Courtesy of the Author).

areas; hidden behind it and to one side is the bedroom area (Figure 3). The slatted ceiling of the reception area has a curve of its own, extending from a high point at the back down to the facade, recalling Alvar Aalto's ceiling at the Viipuri Municipal Library of 1935. Bedroom and baths are housed in a rectangular wing connected to a corridor behind the reception room. Kitchen, servants' quarters, and a playroom are in a courtyard. Two massive fieldstone chimneys firmly anchor the exterior.

When Harrison began to work on Nelson's house, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., gave the architect a small oceanside lot adjoining his son's property. In the 1950s Nelson Rockefeller had an old local pinewood barn transported there. In about 1960 Harrison enlarged the barn and made several renovations, including opening half the wall facing the ocean to make a huge picture window. The house's wood construction, its openness, and floor-to-ceiling sliding window, together with its dry rock garden, are reminiscent of a Japanese tea house. It provides yet another example of Harrison's design freedom and versatility.

SOURCES

The above material is adapted from the forthcoming book by the author on Wallace Kirkman Harrison, to be published by Rizzoli, New York City. The Wallace Kirkman Harrison Archive is at Avery Library, Columbia University, New York City.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY WALLACE K. HARRISON

The Anchorage, Nelson A. Rockefeller House, Seal Harbor, 1941, Extant

William A. M. Burden House, Northeast Harbor, 1947, Extant
Harrison House Renovation, Seal Harbor, 1960, Extant

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